ED 423 164 INSTRUCTION AND DELIGHT: SOME OBSERVATIONS FOR MUSEUMS.

1 OF 1

KING, MARGARET J. 95 10P.

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 164 SO 028 503

AUTHOR	King, Margaret J.
TITLE	Instruction and Delight: Some Observations for Museums.
PUB DATE	1995-00-00
NOTE	10p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Cultural Centers; *History Instruction; *Imagination; *Material Culture; *Museums; *Popular Culture; Realia; Resource Centers
IDENTIFIERS	*Disney (Walt)

ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the work of artist-creator Walt Disney as a model for museum educators to draw the public into its work. Disney Land and Disney World are viewed as monuments of U.S. life and imagination, a living museum that attracts 40 million U.S. visitors per year. The paper describes what should be a partnership among the image-making, story-telling, and space-making of the entertainment theme park, and the curatorship, analysis, and scholarship of museums. These components could come together for the "instruction and delight" equation of learning. The paper cites strengths and weaknesses of various exhibits and museums to make the point that museums are often mired in the printed word. The researcher challenges museums to take pointers from the "imagineering" of Disney and others who saw the "entertainment" definition of focusing attention combined with the "education" definition of leading out and not staying with what people already know. Examples are given as to how this could be done to make the history of the shared culture the popular, vibrant, and expanding tapestry of the U.S. adventure. (EH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 423 164

Instruction and Delight: Some Observations for Museums.

by Margaret J. King

SO 028 503

Published: 1995

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

MARGARET J. KING

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Margaret J. King, Ph.D.
Cultural Studies and Analysis
215/592-8544
Lecture text
AAM - 5.24.95 - Philadelphia, PA

Instruction and Delight: Some Observations for Museums

I'll open with a prediction about education and entertainment by the inventor of the classroom instructional film and educator of every generation since the 1930s.

"The theater of education will be any marketplace, public square, hill or dale where power can be found to project a motion picture on a screen." Note here the image of education as drama.

The same predictor made a powerful connection between the worlds of instruction and of entertainment:

"We have always tried to be guided by the basic idea that in the discovery of knowledge there is great entertainment --as, conversely, in all great entertainment there is always some grain of wisdom, humanity, or enlightenment to be gained....We have long held that the normal gap between what is regarded as entertainment and what is defined as educational represents an old and untenable viewpoint."

If you haven't already guessed, these are the words of Walt Disney, leader in entertainment, the arts, and creativity, and one of the most influential shapers of the 20th century. Disney's innovations in these fields have profound implications for the way we think about communicating concepts, especially in museums. The "Disney effect" on museology is impossible to overestimate, and is just now becoming evident as we museums move toward a more self-conscious position about the ways in which they operate and affect their audiences.

In this light, we can note something about just two devices of professional conferences: that the large-screen projectors in the ballroom where we are hearing and seeing our speakers come from the commercial sports stadium, while our slides came from the stereopticon, the drawing room entertainment of the Victorian home in the last century.

The remarks of our keynote speaker, David McCullough, are worth extending in this session.. After hearing him describe so deftly the work and persona of Charles Willson Peale, the 18th century founder of America's first art museum in Independence Hall, I was waiting for him to cite the modern counterpart of Peale the showman, craftsman, problem-solver, risk-taker, and universal genius who was interested in everything and whose first concern was always the audience: This is our foremost image-maker and popular historian of the 20th century. My reference here is again to Walt Disney, the enormous body of work he created in his studios and in Imagineering, and the importance of that work to image-making and story telling. Nothing could be more important to the agendas of the museum community, especially in the service of popular education as set forth in Excellence and Equity.

McCullough noted the vital mission of museums not only as the keepers of history but as its communicators. That mission is not to speak to each other but to the public - a far more difficult task. Museums tend to create for each other's delight and instruction, but of course this is not their purpose. Disney's work is exemplary in this light because the success of his organization is rooted in the act of communication, especially of American history and its values. The theme parks, Disneyland and World, are more than the world's largest artwork; they are a monument to American life and the American imagination. They are a living museum system that attract 40 million visitors a year in this country alone. And they contain within them more traditional museums, of art, of culture, and of art-making and animation, created by Van Romans and Disney Imagineering.

We are seeing an increasing "heating up of traffic," in the words of the late Reuel Denney, between two cultures: the image-making and storytelling and space-making of entertainment --especially the them park -- and the curatorship, analysis, and scholarship of museums.

Each side of the "instruction and delight" equation is being compelled to use the talents and insights of the other. The reason is that both are dedicated to the same quest: the capture of the popular imagination.

A member of the Imagineering team, Bob Weis, should be credited for leading me to think about this question more deeply -- by asking me to go back to the definition of entertainment and the definition of education. Education means to lead out - to advance from what we already believe is true, never to stay with what we already know. To entertain is somewhat more surprising. It means to focus attention. To entertain ideas is not to show them cartoons but to attend, focus, hold our attention, which is the very essence of thinking. This puts entertainment in a new light, and one that should make the museum's job of education much more compatible with drawing and satisfying audiences. Attention getting and keeping is of course the primary problem of education, as Robert Coles described in his talk yesterday.

The idea of entertainment as enrichment is not new. Americans have always asked our entertainments to do more for us than divert or provide escape. The country fair and world's fair were places of learning about other people, places, and ways of doing things. The picture book was the primer of the written word, the alphabet. Nursery rhymes and fairy tales were moral lessons, and our museums of history, science, and art were and continue to be well traveled routes to upward mobility. Which of course is what a university education is all about. Charles Willson Peale himself bridged this paradox in our first museum's mission to offer a world of "rational

amusement." His founding fathers portrait gallery was an early model of the Hall of Presidents at Walt Disney World.

- People insist on more than content: our entertainments and education must work for us, must show dividends in their applied value and direct benefits. To succeed, they must be about more than themselves: they are always about us.

The Holocaust Museum achieves this goal by total immersion, which is the museum term for themeing; it was instructive to learn that this museum was designed not by museum professionals or architects but by theater and film directors. At the other end of the spectrum, the achievement of the Star Trek exhibit at the Air and Space Museum was actually compromised by acres of text on the wall --an ironic way to tell the story of a television series. Museums are too often stuck in the print era, while entertainment has gone on to explore the universe of images that gives them direct access to our minds: We don't think in words, we think in pictures. The Seeds of Change exhibit uses the power of images within a narrative of themed spaces to tell its story and here you could see the Imagineering touch at work

So the theme of the Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Los Angeles is: the West, in the largest sense our ideas, myths, symbols, and impressions, our response to the West, fact and fiction, as our most uniquely American period. A collaboration between a major entertainment company --Walt Disney Imagineering-- and a history museum has resulted in an exhibition on Disney's Wild West that touched so many lives that the fire marshall had to order the gallery doors closed because the opening-night crowds far exceeded the legal capacity of the building.

By contrast, the California Academy of Science in Golden Gate park produced a beautiful dinosaur exhibit, complete with raptors, T-rex, amber fossils, and DNA discussions. But the museums was careful to make no reference at all to the film *Jurassic Park* - which was the obvious inspiration and key to the exhibit. It was a lost opportunity to key into the visitor's "on-board" mental equipment. Museums are so used

to de-contextualizing their material that the exhibit's very inspiration was ignored. The work of making connections, the exhibit story, was left to the visitor. Making those connections is a museum job, otherwise museums are no better than attics of stuff - interesting only to the expert who has been trained for a lifetime to make sense of what they contain.

Also in Golden Gate Park, the deYoung Museum, like the Autry, likewise drew plenty of visitors, who milled around in a confused melee of five different lines under many signs --all struggling to get through the doors to the Monet exhibit. Here is a classic case of "museum chaos," the term I have begun to use to describe the result of two conflicting motives: outreach to visitors versus guarding collections. While museums are trying to appeal to visitors, they can't handle their guests or treat them like guests (again, the Disney term for visitors) when they actually appear. There is still much to be learned from professional sports, where crowds of thousands have to be received and seated in very limited time and space. After all, the deYoung was part of the Pan American Exhibition of 1915, like all world's fairs, a classic fusion of entertainment and learning. So there has been ample time and now, the motivation to look to entertainment for some lessons in visitor management.

Lest it be assumed that I am saying that museums handle things poorly and Disney can do no wrong--I just returned from California where the popularity of the new *Indiana Jones' Temple of the Forbidden Eye* ride in Disneyland has created crowds so large that they threaten to swallow the Adventureland section of the park, with lines edging out all the way into the central hub. Here is an instance where the theme park can look to the museum world for answers--the device of the King Tut blockbuster: the timed ticket system, to release its visitors back into the stream instead of immobilizing them in a line with a two-hour wait. It is amazing, though, what people are willing to endure for an intense 90-second experience, which is a message that should not be lost on museums, whose average visit time is still under one hour.

Closer to home, and with no wait at all, in the Marriott Hotel lobby, is the glass case exhibit of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. It displays the medal and explains its recipient as "Wilson, John, Private, Company C. 21st Ohio Infantry." David McCullough critiqued the boring signage, with its driest of details about the 1863 attack on the Confederate railroad. What, he posed to the museum audience, happened to the train, to Wilson, the group?

As the historian posed these questions, the answers came to me: this was the story of the Andrews Raid that went 200 miles behind Confederate lines to seize an engine and destroy track and burn bridges between Atlanta and Chattanooga. I knew these answers not because I am a Civil War scholar but because as a nine-year-old on a summer visit to my grandparents in Electra, Texas, I saw a movie. The year was 1956, the film starred Fess Parker, as James J. Andrews, the title was The Great Locomotive Chase, and the history teacher was Walt Disney. If Mr. McCullough learned his history the way most Americans do, through popular culture, he too would have had his answers.

Here again is Disney the story-teller doing the real job of history: the connect people to their past, to who they are and can be: not just its facts and issues, but its themes. Movies literally animate their themes, as museums are now trying to do with the total immersion exhibit. The theme park takes the movie one step further to create a live-in virtual reality, the closest thing we have yet to time travel. Our living history museums operate as history theme parks.

Returning to the Marriott lobby: The museum question is why the exhibit downstairs does not make use of the wealth of popular culture, our shared experience of the past in movies and television, to make its point, as the Boston Fine Arts Museum featured the John Neagle portrait of Davy Crockett during the craze of 1955. The medals in the case are not yet a story: they are isolated artifacts, things under glass. Making them come alive now includes involving the visitor's own knowledge base, and that is primarily a matter of popular culture.

Mr. McCullough also was dismayed that his students did not know who George Marshall was. A colleague later told me that he learned who Marshall was not through his education--the history books in his school did not cover the post world War II period--but through popular fiction-- a comic novel called *The Little World of Don Camillio*, which made a humorous reference to the Marshall Plan and prompted him to ask his parents what that was.

The choice is not between popular culture *or* museums. It is not a zero sum equation, but two sides of the same coin. Mr. McCullough's parting admonition to museum professions was to "Do it for your country --by becoming more exciting." In order to draw on our common images, experiences, and beliefs, we must begin with an understanding of what we know and how we know it. I can think of no other way to do this than through the lens of our shared culture -- the popular, vibrant, and expanding tapestry of the American adventure.

Addendum to "Instruction and Delight: Some Observations for Museums"

by J. G. O'Boyle, Cultural Studies & Analysis, Philadelphia

David McCullough cited the Civil War medal of Honor displayed in the Marriott hotel lobby and read the "boring" signage that listed the driest of details about penetrating into enemy territory in September 1963, and seizing a train. He cited it as lacking a story--who was this recipient "Wilson, John, Private, Company C, 21st Ohio Infantry?" What happened at the train? Did he succeed or fail? Where is the story?

The story was told by Walt Disney in 1956 in **The Great Locomotive Chase** starring Fess Parker as **James J. Andrews**, leader of a group of 19 Union volunteers known as the **Andrews Raiders**. In order to disrupt enemy supply lines the raiders penetrated 200 miles into Confederate Georgia, stole a train, and burned bridges and destroyed track until they were captured or killed.

The Medal of Honor in the hotel lobby was awarded to raider Private J.A.Wilson (played by Lennie Greer in the film) by President Abraham Lincoln. James J. Andrews died in Andersonville prison and did not qualify for a posthumous Congressional Medal of honor because he was not a member of the military but a civilian volunteer.

The Andrews raid was also the basis of the Buster Keaton silent film **The General**. *The General*, as any baby boomer knows from the Disney film, was the name of the locomotive stolen by the Andrews Raiders.

"Plastic history?" (McCullough's term)